

## The Quality Without a Name

Easter 3B, Acts 3.12-19

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The Rev. Scott Walters

What do the Alhambra, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Vietnam Memorial, Calvary Church, and the front porch at 387 Dickinson St. have in common? That's a bit of a trick question. Because the answer I'm looking for is "The Quality Without a Name."

Not much is similar among these places. They're built from different materials for different purposes in different contexts. But what they share is that *something* that makes a built place go to work on us. A hard-to-name quality that makes it compelling, that makes us relax or pay attention or become suddenly reverent or joyful or meditative or moved.

Our front porch might not have made your list of such places. And with its peeling floor paint and a weedy lawn out front, it will never appear in *Southern Living*. The risen Christ was mistaken for a gardener, but that's never happened to me.

But during this pandemic year, we probably spent more of our waking lives on that porch than any other room in the house. Something about its proportions, or the oil lamps in mason jars Ardelle hung up on hooks, or the exposed rafters under its sheltering roof, or its just-so distance from passers-by on the sidewalk...or some mixture of all of that plus a general lack of ordinary human interaction for a year went into making it a place where we'd end up several times every day. Some quality drew us there.

"The Quality Without a Name" isn't a term I invented. It's something Christopher Alexander wrote about more than thirty years ago in a book called *The Timeless Way of Building*. A beautiful object with line drawings and grainy photos and Zen-like observations. If you ask me, the book itself embodies the quality it points at but can't quite name.

Christopher Alexander worried that the things we build are losing their soul. They're losing that elusive something that has made certain buildings and parks and squares and all kinds of places alive and compelling to humans for thousands of years. And they're losing something essential because what's essential is hard to talk about. It never looks just the same twice. It's hard to define, but without it, we'll never make anything more than a little temporary shelter. And if we stop trying to stay true to the quality without a name or express it in new ways, something more is at stake than bad buildings. We may become a little less human. A little less fully alive.

In the early chapters of Acts, a great struggle was taking place in Jerusalem. And I think it was a struggle over a quality without a name in the Jewish faith.

Now, you might say that the struggle was over something that can be named quite easily. It was over whether or not Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead and whether he was the messiah, right? Well...sort of. Except the whole notion of messiah and the whole notion of what it meant to be true to the faith of Abraham was being radically challenged and changed, turned completely upside down.

It never occurred to most people that it might actually be difficult to recognize the messiah when he arrived. They knew the scriptures and the tradition. But we're told that even after the resurrection — maybe *especially* after the resurrection — even Jesus's disciples and closest friends had a hard time seeing how his life could have been related to what they'd

read about in the prophets. The difference between what they expected and what they experienced was like the difference between the Vietnam Memorial and the Alhambra. It took some work to see that there was something timeless, something deeper in the scriptures that Jesus's life was true to.

So, back to Acts, here's some context for today's reading. Peter and John have arrived at the temple at three o'clock in the afternoon, the hour when sacrifices and prayers were offered. Take note of this. These were Jews doing what faithful Jews did, and they were doing these things on the resurrection side of Easter.

As they arrive, people are carrying in a man who had been lame since birth. He would sit at the temple's gate and beg alms every day. But on this day, he was healed. He stood up and walked. And Peter used the occasion to tell everyone in the temple about Jesus.

From our perspective it's hard to read this story as anything other than one about a Christian evangelizing a bunch of Jews. But Peter wasn't preaching that Jews needed another religion. He was trying to convince his fellow Jews that Jesus was truly one of them. That Jesus was not an enemy, but a brilliant and transforming expression of the heart of the Hebrew faith, the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

So, what if Easter is about letting go of some of our concrete expectations and understandings, and learning to see deeper connections and patterns and meanings, the timeless way, a quality without a name in our faith beneath its familiar forms?

I'm reflecting on all this with you as an Episcopal priest just a few weeks after Gallup released yet another report of the decline, if not impending death, of organized religion in America. As you've probably read, for the first time since Gallup began its survey in 1937, less than half of Americans now belong to a church, mosque, or synagogue. You might imagine this trend as a long, slow decline. It is not. The percentage of church members was 73% in 1937 and was still 70% in year 2000. But in the two decades since, it has dropped 23 percentage points to 47%.

That's a startling number for the dwindling group of us who find church to be an indispensable part of our lives. But I also think all those decades of high church attendance by the people in power in our country made it easy to misread the story of the church's beginning in the book of Acts. We look back on the explosion of new first century Christians as if American Christianity was just what Jesus had in mind. But, friends, I hate to be the one to say it, but we're the institution now. And what we read of in Acts is the undoing of the institutional religion of the day.

And it wasn't just that a new branch of Judaism, soon to be called Christianity, was emerging. A few short decades after the resurrection of Jesus, the Jerusalem temple would be destroyed, and the whole Jewish sacrificial system went away with it. Think about this for a moment. The heart of Second Temple Judaism, around which Jewish life and practice had been oriented for centuries, the system around which Jesus's life was oriented as well, all of that effectively disappeared in an imperial cloud of dust and rubble after the Romans laid siege to the city.

The good news — the gospel, that is — is that the forms that went away 2,000 years ago were just that. Forms. Temporary expressions or containers for faithful human life with Yahweh, a name that means some Zen-like thing like "I am who I am." Life, in other words, with the God without a nameable name. And life with the living God did not come to an end with the end of those beloved and ancient forms.

What does all this mean for us, Episcopalian Christians at Calvary Church in Memphis right now? Well, I don't exactly know. No one does. Not even the Gallup pollsters. But I don't think it means tweaking the old forms of church in clever new ways in a desperate attempt to win back those onetime believers who are slipping so quickly away. Electric guitars and tattooed preachers in skinny jeans are just forms of altar flowers and polished silver and stained glass. Useful only insofar as they are used to shape a community in the way of Jesus. Distractions if they become the focus of our efforts and our attention.

It also won't mean preserving our beloved forms of worship or returning to something even older, in search of something stable and pure. If there's anything in Jesus's life and teaching that commends preservation or self-protection, someone's going to have to point it out to me. Wherever I look in the gospels, Jesus is telling us to stop trying to save our lives and lay them down for the sake of the world he loves. And then he does just that with his own unprotected life.

Which means that if we don't think the way of Jesus can survive the death of his church, we've somehow started following the wrong savior along the way. The implosion of religion as people knew it is actually our story in a far deeper way than American Christian families with 2.1 children making their seersucker way to Easter Church.

Friends, the church was made for a time more like this one than it was for a mythologized Christian America. Christianity was made to sprout from the rubble of religion, not to be one more religion struggling to preserve itself.

There is a holy place that clearly has the quality without a name that I haven't mentioned. It's a place I've not yet visited. But by all accounts, the Western Wall of Jerusalem is a place humming with the sacred, unnamable quality upon which all religious devotion depends. I know you've seen the images of people weeping and stuffing prayers into the cracks between its stones, if you haven't done so yourself.

That wall, of course, is what's left of the very temple where Peter and John healed a man lame from birth at three o'clock one afternoon. It's what's left of the temple that the Roman Empire destroyed a few decades later. Which is so much more, I think it's important to name right about now, than what's left of that empire. Thousands of seekers for God are not drawn to the chariots and palaces of Caesars. Not drawn like they are, weeping and praying, to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

So, maybe that wall can be an image for us modern Christians of what it means to stay fixed, attentive, and true to the quality without a name in Jesus's way. Jesus's people didn't tear down the temple. They remained very much active and alive within it, healing the sick and offering up their sacrifices and prayers, challenging and engaging the people they met there with their own experiences of God. And they remained, even after the temple had fallen down around them, staying deeply true to the Hebrew people's way with God, in an altered world. But a world that had never needed the good news of God's loving and persistent presence in their lives more than right then. A world that's never needed that good news, whatever forms it sloughs off or takes on, than ours does right here and right now.